Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 02263 01 OF 02 221112Z
ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
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P R 221016Z APR 78
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7720
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2263

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PEPR, SY, LE, UR, IZ
SUBJ: SYRIAN CHIEF OF STAFF COMMENTS ON AREA DEVELOPMENTS

SUMMARY: SHIHABI SAYS SYRIAN LEADERSHIP REMAINS COMMITTED TO IMPROVING BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH US. DOUBTS ADF UNITS WILL MOVE SOUTH TO LITANI. SEES ARAFAT'S POSTION AS OME-WHAT STRONGER TODAY AS DEMONSTRATED IN FATAH'S RECENT ARREST OF IRAQI-ORIENTED FEDAYEE,. HE ANTICIPATES NO MAJOR CLASH WITH CHRISTIAN MILITIA IN LEABANON. CONSIDERS THAT SOVIET POLICY IS MAINTENANCE OF "NO PEACE, NO WAR" SITUATION IN AREA. END SUMMARY.

1. PAID ONE-HOUR FAREWELL CALL ON CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI APRIL 20 AND HAD FIRST SUBSTANTIVE EXCHANGE WITH HIM SINCE OUR MEETING LAST DECEMBER (DAMASCUS 7712 NOTAL). HE BEGAN BY QUESTIONING ME CLOSELY ABOUT THE REASONS BEHIND MY TRANSFER UNTIL HE HAD SATISFIED

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 DAMASC 02263 01 OF 02 221112Z

HIMSELF THAT IT HAD NO IMPLICATIONS REGARDING OUR INTENTIONS TOWARDS FUTURE SYRO-AMERICAN RELATIONS. HE THEN SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT HIS PERSONAL COMMITMENT, WHICH HE SAID ASSAD AND THE LEADERSHIP SHARED, TO FURTHER EXPAND AND DEEPEN OUR BILATERAL TIES AS RAPIDLY AS POSSIBLE. (IN CONFIRMATION OF THIS, HE TABLED A REQUEST FOR CERTAIN TRAINING PROGRAMS REPORTED SEPTEL.) SUMMING UP

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

THE PAST FOUR YEARS, SHIHABI SAID HE FELT THAT
"TRULY SIGNIFICANT AND POSITIVE PROGRESS " HAD BEEN MADE
IN IMPROVING BILATERAL GELATIONS DESPITE CERTAIN DISAGREEMENTS
ABOUT THE PEACE PROCESS.

2. LEBANON. I DESCRIBED TO SHIHABI OUR EFFORTS TO GET UNIFIL
ON THE GROUND AS RAPIDLY AS POSSIBLE AND OUR ASSOCIATED
GOAL OF SECURING TOTAL ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH
LEBANON IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS. WE DISCUSSED THE PROBLEM
OF CONTROLLING THE TERRITORY BETWEEN PRESENT ADF LINES
AND THE LITANI. HE STATED HIS POSITION IS THAT UNIFIL'S CONTROL
OF THE LITANI BRIDGES SHOULD BE SUFFICIEINT TO INHIBIT
MOVEMENT OF ANY SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF FEDAYEEN
INTO SOUTH INTENT ON ATTACKING ISRAELI TARGETS. SAID
MY UNDERSTANDING WAS THAT LITANI PER SE CONSTITUTED NO
BARRIER AND INFILTRATORS WOULD SIMPLY WADE THE RIVER
WITHOUT CONFRONTING UNIFIL CONTINGENTS AT BRIDGES. HE
REPLIED THAT EVEN IF IDF HAD STAYED ON THE RIVER
ISRAELIS WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TOTALLY SEAL OFF
MOVEMENT OF SMALL GROUPS OF INFILTRATORS. SAID I HAD
URGED PRESIDENT ASSAD IN OUR APRIL 17 MEETING TO KEEP
AND OPEN MIND ABOUT EXTENSION SOUTHWARDS OF SYRIAN
ADF UNITS. SHIHABI SAID ME PERSONALLY THOUGH THIS
UNLIKELY GIVEN ISRAELIS' REBUFF OF SUCH MOVEMENT LAST YEAR.
HE COMMENTED THAT HAD THE ADF ONLY BEEN ALLOWED TO DEPLY ASTRIDE
THE NABATIYAH CROSSROADS A YEAR AGO THE SUBSEQUENT
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COURSE OF EVENTS IN SOUTH LEBANON COULD HAVE BEEN
CHANGED. I SAID SYRIA SHOULD NOT FORECLOSE POSSIBLE
ADF DEPLOYMENT TO NABATIYAH IN FUTURE, ADDING WE HAD REASON
TO BELIEVE THAT BOTH SARKIS AND WELDHEIM WERE THINKING
OF MAKING SUCH A REQUEST TO DAMASCUS.

3. ARAFAT'S POSITION. SHIHABI BELIEVES THAT ARAFAT
TODAY ENJOYS SOMEWHAT STRONGER POSITION VIS-A-VIS THE
VARIOUS FEDAYEEN GROUPS THAN HE HAD PRIOR TO THE ISRAELI
INVASION. AS EVIDENCE OF THIS, HE CONFIDED HE HAD
RECEIVED INTELLIGENCE REPORT APRIL 19, WHICH HE HAD
REASON TO CREDIT, THAT ON ARAFAT'S ORDERS FATAH HAD
ARRESTED ONE HUNDRED FEDAYEEN OF IRAQI ORIENTATION
(COMMENT: HE DID NOT SPECIFY ALF) INCLUDING THEIR
LEADER, ABU DAOUD, IN NABATIYAH AREA IN PREVIOUS 48 HOURS.
THESE ELEMENTS, SHIHABI OBSERVED, WERE POTENTIALLY THE
BIGGEST TROUBLEMAKERS IN FEDAYEEN RANKS. APPROXIMATELY
1200 PALESTINIANS FROM VARIOUS ARAB COUNTRIES, AS WELL
AS FROM EUROPE, HAD RUSHED INTO LEBANON IN THE EARLY
DAYS FOLLOWING THE ISRAELI INVASION. SOME OF THESE,
SHIHABI BELIEVES, HAVE ALREADY RETURNED HOME. NO MORE
HAVE ARRIVED AND SYRIA WILL BAR FUTURE ARRIVALS.

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

4. IRAQI INTENTIONS. ONE BATTALION, TOTALLING APPROXI-
MATELY 500 IRAQI ARMY COMMANDOS, ENTERED LEBANON AFTER
THE ISRAELI INVASION AND REMAIN IN SOUTHERN REGION.
SYRIA RECOGNIZES CONTINUING ILL WILL FELT BY BAGHDAD
TOWARDS DAMASCUS BUT DOES NOT ANTICIPATE THAT THE IRAQI
REGULARS WILL PROVOKE INCIDENTS IN LEBANON.

5. I RECALLED THAT SOME TEN DAYS AGO A DAMASCUS NEWS-
PAPER HAD ACCUSED THE ARAB COMMUNIST ORGANIZATION (ACO),
WORKING UNDER IRAQI DIRECTION, OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE
ASSASSINATIONS OF LEADING ALAWITES. SHIHABI SAID HE
HAD NOT READ THAT STORY BUT MAINTAINED IT HAD NO
BASIS IN FACT. ASSERTED THE ACO HAD BEEN STAMPED OUT
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SECRET

PAGE 04 DAMASC 02263 01 OF 02 221112Z

IN 1975 AND HAD NOT REVIVED. HE CRYPTICALLY ACKNOWLEDGED
THE SYRIAN AUTHORITIES HAD YET TO DISCOVER THE PERPETRATORS
OF THE ASSASSINATIONS, SAYING THAT THE INVESTIGATION WAS
BEING FOLLOWED UP SYSTEMTICALLY AND ONLY PATIENCE WAS
NEEDED TO ACHIEVE RESULTS.

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 02263 02 OF 02 221128Z
ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
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P R 221016Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7721
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMEMBASSY LONDON
SMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 3041
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S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2263

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

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6. CHRISTIAN-SYRIAN RELATIONS. SHIHABI DOES NOT BELIEVE
THAT THE LEBANESE CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP INTENDS OR
WOULD BE SO FOOLISH AS TO TRY TO DISLODGE THE ADF
FROM AREAS WHERE IT IS PRESENTLY DEPLOYED IN LEBANON.
DAMASCUS INTERPRETED BASHIR GEMAYYEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT
TWO DAYS AGO (THAT CHRISTIAN MILITIA WOULD ASSUME
RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURITY IN CHRISTIAN AREAS). AS
APPLYING ONLY TO THOSE AREAS WHERE THE ADF IS ABSENT. HE
ACKNOWLEDGED CURRENT SYRIAN MISUNDERSTANDING WITH
SOME CHRISTIAN LEADERS; HE EXPLICITLY EXCLUDED
PIERRE GEMAYYEL FROM THIS CATEGORY. HE DOES NOT ANTICIPATE
A MAJOR CONFRONTATION BETWEEN CHRISTIAN MILITIA AND THE
ADF.

7. SYRIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS. RECALLED SHIHABI'S APPEAL
OF LAST DECEMBER THAT USG NOT SO ACT AS TO PUCH
SYRIA INTO A CORNER, LEAVING IT NO CHICE BUT TO ACCEPT
DOMINANT SOVIET INFLUENCE OVER IT SPLICIES. NOTED
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THAT SYRIA STLL DISAGREED SHAPLY WITH SADAT'S INITIATIVES
AND OUR SUPPORT OF EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI TALKS BUT STRESSED
THAT OUT GOAL REMAINED A COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT. SAID
WE WERE CONVINCED THAT SADAT'S EFFORTS WOULD EVENTUALLY
BE APPRECIATED BY THE ARABS AS HAVING SET IN MOTION A
TRAIN OF EVENTS WHICH WOULD BRING THE AREA CLOSER TO
A PEACE ACCEPTABLE AND BENEFICIAL TO ARABS. THE
"HUMILIATIONS," I CONTINUED, WHICH SYRIA SAID IT HAD
SUFFERED AS RESULT OF SADAT'S INITIATIVES WOULD FADE
IN IMPORTANCE IF WE SUCCEED IN OUR EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH
PEACE IN THE AREA. SYRIA HAS ITS OWN NATIONAL INTERSTS,
AS DO WE AND THE SOVIETS; ALL WE ASK IS THAT SYRIA REMAIN
FAITHFUL TO ITS INTERESTS WHICH WE BELIEVE LIE IN
ACHIEVING PEACE. SHIHABI EMPHATICALLY AGREED. I CON-
CLUDED THAT AMERICA HAS ALWAYS HAD MORE VITAL INTERESTS IN THIS
AREA THAN HAS THE SOVIET UNION. WE ARE WORKING TO
ACHIEVE PEACE, FOLLOWING UP WHATEVER OPENINGS PRESENT
THEMSELVES, BECAUSE PEACE IS IN OUR NATIONAL INTERST.
WE DO NOT BELIEVE THE SAME CAN BE SAID OF THE SOVIETTS.
SHIHABI REPLIED HE AGREED THAT SOVIETS INTERESTS LAY IN
MAINTENANCE OF "NO WAR, NO PEACE".

8. SYRO-IRAQI RELATIONS. I SAID WE CONSIDERED IT MOST IMPORTANT
THAT A WAY BE FOUND TO RESTORE SYRIAN-EGYPTIAN HARMONY
AS SOON AS POSSIBLE BECAUSE WITHOUT THIS WE DOUBTED
SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS COULD BE MADE TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE
SETTLEMENT. HE INTERJECTED SLYLY THAT THAT DID NOT
APPEAR TO BE US POLICY RE SYRIAN-IRAQI RELATIONS.

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

REPLIED WE HAD NO INTEREST IN DIVIDING BAGHDAD FROM
DAMASCUS AND WERE UNDERTAKING NO ACTIONS TO THIS END. IT
APPEARED TO US THAT BAGHDAD WAS PREOCCUPIED WITH ITS
OWN INTERNAL SITUATION AND WAS CONTENT TO SAVAGE OTHER
ARAB STATES THROUGH PROPAGANDA ATTACKS. SHIHABI AGREED
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AND ASSURED ME HE HAD ONLY BEEN JOKING IN IMPLYING WE
HAD BEEN TRYING TO DIVIDE BAGHDAD FROM DAMASCUS.
BAGHDAD, HE ASSERTED, REMAINS HOSTILE TO SYRIA. HE
FORESEES NO EARLY PROSPECT OF CHANGE.

9. AT END OF MEETING, SHIHABI ASKED IF WE EXPECTED ANY
CHANGE IN ISRAELI LEADERSHIP. REPLIED THIS WAS DIFFICULT
TO PREDICT. A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY IN ISRAEL
APPEARED UNLIKELY IN NEAR FUTURE AND PRIME MINISTER
BEGIN IS A MASTER POLITICAN WHO,HEALTH PERMITTING, IS
LIKELY TO MAINTAIN HIS POSITION. IN ANSWER TO A
QUESTION WHETHER SHIHABI SAW ANY MAJOR CONFLICT AHEAD,
HE SAID THAT IN HIS POST HE NEVER COULD RULE OUT THIS
POSSIBILITY BUT HE DID NOT THINK ANOTHER WAR INEVITABLE.

10. IN TAKING LEAVE, I SAID I HOPED THAT SHIHABI WOULD MAKE
HIMSELF AVAILABLE FOR DISCUSSION WITH MY SUCCESSOR. HE SAID HE
CONSIDERED THIS HIGHLY DESIRABLE AND PROMISED TO DO SO.

11. COMMENT. ALTHOUGH A HIGHLY ELUSIVE INTERLOCUTOR, SHIHABI HAS
BEEN ONE OF OUR MOST VALUABLE WHEN WE HAVE BEEN ABLE
TO GET TO HIM.HE IS PERIODICALLY TIPPED AS A FUTURE
PRIME MINISTER BUT I DOUBT HE WOULD REACH OUT FOR THAT
POSITION. HE APPEARS TO CONTINUE TO ENJOY THE FULL
CONFIDENCE OF ASSAD.
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Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

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TAGS: PEPR, PINT, MOPS, SY, LE, UR, IZ, (AL-SHIHABI, HIKMAT), (MURPHY, RICHARD W)
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EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
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